

Paper from the Conference “INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden”, organised by the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) in Norrköping 11-13 June 2007. Conference Proceedings published by Linköping University Electronic Press at [www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/](http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/). © The Author.

## **Inter: The transversal Spaces, Processes and Networks of Cultural Studies**

Johan Fornäs

Department of Culture Studies (Tema Q), Linköping University, Sweden

[fornas@acsis.liu.se](mailto:fornas@acsis.liu.se)

This is an introduction to the proceedings of “Inter: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden”, held in Norrköping 11-13 June 2007. The conference was organised by the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS), whose director Johan Fornäs here gives a brief background to the event and its three primary dimensions of transgression and interrelation: the spatial flows of transnational globalisation between regions and countries of Europe and the world at large; the temporal processes of culturalisation that appear to have made culture and cultural research increasingly central to society and academia; and the networks of trans- and interdisciplinary cooperation that both enable and necessitate these kinds of events. The text is based on his plenary presentations at the conference, and at the same time serves as a preface to these conference proceedings.

## Inter: The Transversal Spaces, Processes and Networks of Cultural Studies

The Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) is a national centre for interdisciplinary and international networking in the field of cultural studies, with a wide range of activities (<http://www.acsis.liu.se>). The 11-13 June event “INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden” is its second large conference. The first one in June 2005 was the first *national* conference for cultural studies, whose proceedings are published on the web by Linköping University Electronic Press at <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/015/>, and which also inspired us to edit a printed book on cultural studies in Sweden, *Kulturstudier i Sverige*, edited by Bodil Axelsson and Johan Fornäs (Lund: Studentlitteratur 2007).

The “INTER” keyword summarises a series of challenges and opportunities for cultural studies as a kind of borderland field, each of which will be in focus one of the three days: spatial *internationalisation*, temporal *interepochality* and organisational *interdisciplinarity*. What does the European project mean for cultural identities and cultural research today? How has the role and position of culture and cultural research changed in society? How to deal with the boundaries between academic disciplines and subfields? While the innovative sessions and papers presented here testify to the potential vitality of this research field, it must be remembered that cultural studies is no securely established category. This is not least true of European cultural studies. Many have argued that there is no such thing at all, as there is no specific theoretical canon and no strong organisational frames linking this continent and distinguishing it from the rest of this glocal field. Whereas there are some germinal local, national and regional networks, for instance in Sweden and the Nordic countries, it seems as if Europe is rarely an obvious point of identification for cultural researchers, as well as for the citizens of Europe in general. This mirrors the European Union’s much-discussed difficulty finding a social and cultural basis for its collective project, combined with the fussiness of the cultural studies field at large. This conference thus had to grapple the overlapping obstacles of finding ways to construct both at least some kind of European identity and a cultural studies identity, without having recourse to any given entity or institutional framework to fall back on. How this was developed at this conference may be traced through the texts included in these proceedings. The process itself was certainly instructive in highlighting the present conditions for cultural research across spatial, temporal and academic borders.

The conference title intends to position the event in an ambivalent geographic position as European but also both globally international and Swedish as well. The European character is confirmed by the active participation of Álvaro Pina (Lisbon, Portugal), Anne Scott Sørensen (Odense, Denmark) and Mikko Lehtonen (Tampere, Finland) who together with myself form the European branch of the Board of the Association for Cultural Studies (ACS). This association was founded in 2002, inspired by the Crossroads in Cultural Studies conferences initiated in Tampere 1996 (<http://www.cultstud.org/>). But the conference also opens up in two other directions. The participants who have come from other parts of the world – from Canada to the Philippines – are most welcome, and the ACS itself is a global association, with a website, mailing lists, newsletter and directory that together with the Crossroads conferences offer useful resources for transnational exchange in this field. The last, 6<sup>th</sup> Crossroads conference took place last summer in Istanbul, and next summer the 7<sup>th</sup> one will be held in Kingston, Jamaica. In a third direction, the Inter conference is locally placed in the typical Swedish city of Norrköping, sometimes called “Sweden’s Manchester”, due to its history from textile industries to the present post-industrial regeneration, and organised by Linköping University’s national centre for cultural studies in Sweden, ACSIS. It actually fills the function of a second open Swedish conference for cultural studies, since the ACSIS arranged

a similar event in Swedish two years ago, where a mailing list crystallised into a national network for cultural studies in Sweden.

This is thus in many ways an occasion to build new bridges across borders. Some of these borders are geographical: between cities, nations, regions and continents. We chose the admittedly rather general title “Inter” in order to express this interest in mediations. The plenaries were constructed in order to give each day a specific focus. The first day placed the geographic dimension of Europe in the world in focus. The “*Inter/spatiality*” theme covered two plenary sessions, one for discussing European identity and politics in general, and the other for thinking about cultural research in this rapidly changing arena.

The second conference day, the “*Inter/temporality*” theme moved into the historical dimension. Its first plenary discussed the idea of culturalisation: is culture bigger or more important today than before, as a result of processes of aestheticisation, mediatization, globalisation etc.? The second temporal plenary more specifically looked closer at uses of history in late modern societies.

The last day then put “*Inter/disciplinarity*” in focus, with a plenary scrutinising the potentials and problems of cross-disciplinary interaction, asking how cultural research can and should define and defend its usefulness in these times of legitimation crisis for academia at large in general, and for the humanities in particular.

Besides these five plenary sessions, the conference included one evening session with the ACS, another one with the Swedish network for cultural studies, a reception at the City Hall of Norrköping, a conference dinner, and some 40 group-sessions covering a wide range of topics. The national board of the ACSIS served as a programme committee for the conference, chaired first by Inge Jonsson and now by Dan Brändström, and with its other members: Alf Björnberg (supplemented by deputy member Lisbeth Larsson, Göteborg University), Robert Burnett (Karlstad University), Peter Aronsson (Linköping University), Orvar Löfgren (Lund University), Anders Olsson (Mid Sweden University), Helena Wulff (Stockholm University), Britta Lundgren (deputy Anders Öhman, Umeå University), Maths Isacson (deputy Birgitta Meurling, Uppsala University), Gunlög Fur (Växjö University) and Per Ledin (Örebro University).

Bodil Axelsson, David Cardell, Andreas Gunnarsson and Sofia Seifarth were in various phases responsible for making it all work, assisted by several other helpful colleagues in the local ACSIS and Linköping University environment. The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond), the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet), the Wenner-Gren Foundations (Wenner-Gren Stiftelserna), Linköping University and the city of Norrköping offered the support needed to make this possible.

The INTER conference had some 240 participants, of whom 54% women and 46% men. 57% came from Sweden (the universities of Linköping, Göteborg, Stockholm, Södertörn, Lund, Uppsala, KTH, Malmö, Umeå, etc.), 36% from the rest of Europe (UK, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Macedonia and Poland), and 4% each from Northern America (USA and Canada) and the Asia-Pacific (Philippines and Australia). Some 25% of participants were affiliated with interdisciplinary academic units, while the largest disciplinary groups came from media and communication studies (18%), literature (8%), education (6%), sociology (6%), STS, language, ethnology, film, architecture and political science (3-5% each), and history, music, anthropology and geography (1-2% each).

Feedback from participants indicates that this was experienced as a great success. It is our hope that European meetings for cultural studies will become a recurrent tradition, supplementing ACS’s global Crossroads events, and possibly alternating between different sites of Europe. ACSIS will definitely continue arranging a wide range of activities in this fermenting field, for the advancement of local, national and transnational cultural studies.